

## Parks Services – Change Proposals

UNISON requests that the ‘Parks Services – Change Proposals’ report is deferred for the following reasons:

1. We were not informed that this report was going to Cabinet, and only found out by chance.
2. We have not been provided with the data or information behind the report, and information that is contained within it and the appendices does not correspond with information previously supplied to unions. For example, the chart at 6.2.2 is said to summarise the key grounds maintenance tasks, volumes and frequencies by operational area, but many of the figures given for work volumes are less than those previously supplied by management to unions, by up to half, and we believe they dramatically underestimate the workload required. There are considerably more than the 45 parks and green spaces listed in Appendix 2.
3. The report proposes major changes to the way the Parks Service operates, but these changes have not been communicated to staff or unions beyond the barest information. The January Team Brief for Recreation Services stated that ‘savings are to be made through: prioritising efficiencies in back office to protect the frontline’, and frontline parks staff were told at this time that it was believed their jobs were safe. At the Parks DCC on 28<sup>th</sup> Jan, unions / reps were told to expect 6 further redundancies of frontline staff on top of the voluntary redundancies just accepted. At the DCC on 25<sup>th</sup> Feb, unions / reps were told that there would now be 12-15 further redundancies (on top of at least 16 frontline VR and unfilled vacancies), and that cemetery staff were to be put in the same redundancy pool as parks staff. It was said that the consultation document would be ready the following week, but as yet this has not been provided and contrary to para 12.6 the formal consultation has not yet started, nor has a date been given for it to start.
4. At the Full Council meeting on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2010 the Council gave formal thanks for the hard work put in by grounds maintenance staff to achieve London in Bloom awards (on top of the record number of Green Flag awards). Now it is proposed to sack these same staff. To what end?
5. No information has been provided on how grounds maintenance work will be completed by the remaining staff or how the volunteering proposals will work. The proposals indicate a reduction to just 38 gardener / grounds maintenance posts (including Team Leaders and apprentices) to maintain open spaces for the whole borough, including compliance with all SLA’s for housing, roadside and other sites. There is very real concern that these proposals have not been thought through adequately and that if they are rushed through it could cost the Council a considerable amount to reverse decisions taken and put things right.
6. As a discretionary service, Parks have already been cut to the bone over the years, so the 50% cut to grounds maintenance (on top of the approx £500k savings already identified in this year’s budget) has a much greater impact, and could well be a disaster in the making. The report to Cabinet on 8<sup>th</sup> Feb relating to this cut acknowledged that the 50% reduction to grounds maintenance could lead to ‘**a significant deterioration in the quality of open space and potential claims from external funding bodies**, particularly the HLF’. This new report barely mentions these very real issues or the threat to the coveted Green Flag awards.
7. Haringey’s Park Service is already low cost and high achieving. According to the Pre- Business Plan Review, the service is ‘**low cost**, relative to nearest neighbours/ London with **above average use and satisfaction (middle/ upper quartile)**’.
8. Although discretionary, parks are used by a wide range of residents. They are a vital resource for everyone, of whatever age, gender, ethnicity, ability and income, and are important for the physical and mental health and well being of all residents. A national survey in 2010 revealed that **87% of people have used their park or green space in the past year, more than any other public**

**service (CABE).** Current use of Haringey's open space is reported at 15.9m visits with **52% residents visiting at least once per week (KMC).**

### **Effect of cuts on residents' safety, perception of safety and parks usage**

9. Appendix 5 Budget Reduction gives no breakdown of how the £510k Grounds Maintenance reduction will be achieved. Reduced staffing levels and reduced frequencies for grass, shrub and hedge maintenance and litter collection will result in neglect and dereliction of Haringey's green spaces. For example reduced frequency of hedge and shrub maintenance means that shrubs will become overgrown and **block sightlines**. This creates more hidden areas where anti-social behaviour can take place without challenge.
10. The importance of sightlines to a feeling of safety within parks is widely acknowledged, and there have been **frequent requests by police in the past to reduce the height of shrubs as a crime prevention measure**. Additionally, previous reports have acknowledged that the presence of on site staff carrying out grounds maintenance deters some anti-social behaviour and provides re-assurance to park users. The proposals will inevitably result in a reduction in visitor numbers, leading to the spiral of decline seen in the 80's and 90's, where residents became afraid to use deserted parks, leaving free rein to those wanting to engage in vandalism and anti-social behaviour. This results in parks becoming unsafe, problem areas and the Council having to spend huge amounts on capital investment to restore them.

### **How practical are the proposals for volunteering as a cost saving exercise?**

#### **What volunteers?**

11. Although responses to the Council's 'Shaping our Future' Survey may have indicated people would like to see greater volunteering in parks, residents were not asked if they were willing to do this work themselves, how frequently and for how long. Staff experience of volunteering projects in parks is that there is a limited response, and it is not unusual for no volunteers to turn up and for staff to have to do the work themselves. This is for occasional events which do not require a great deal of commitment. No evidence has been put forward to support the suggestion that volunteers are available and willing to carry out maintenance work on a frequent or regular basis. Previous efforts to get residents to act as unpaid 'Park Watch' attendants have also been unsuccessful, and there is no evidence to suggest it will be different this time.

#### **How would volunteering work or save money?**

12. Volunteers are mostly untrained, do not have their own tools, and they do not have insurance. To ensure these needs are met someone has to be present to supervise them and the tools, train them and complete health and safety waiver forms and risk assessments for each job carried out. The staffing and organisational costs of this supervision and training may well be greater than the cost of paying existing trained grounds maintenance staff to do the job directly. The salary for a Haringey Gardener is approx £18,000 at top of scale. We believe BTCV staff are paid several thousand pounds more than this.
13. Funding should not be re-directed to the voluntary sector for the purpose of service delivery when this money could be used to pay the wages of existing parks staff.

### **Efficiency through Machinery Replacement**

14. Staff have previously put forward various ideas of how the parks service delivery could be improved and made more efficient. The biggest issue relates to having decent working machinery. Parks Management accepted at least 5 years ago that much machinery was outdated (particularly larger grass cutting machines) and in need of replacement, however staff are still using this same machinery, with frequent break downs and consequent down time. There is no mention of this issue within the present report.

15. The issue has been repeatedly raised at DCC, where staff have been told there is no money for new machines. But while gardeners are expected to continue to work with machinery which is 10 or 15 years old, there has been substantial capital spend across the council on new computers, on the basis this will enable staff to be more efficient in the work they carry out. Machinery for parks staff is the equivalent of computers (which grounds maintenance staff do not have) for other departments. How can staff do their jobs effectively if machines are regularly breaking down? It results in huge amounts of down time as work stops and the machines have to be taken for repair, frequent repair costs (parts and labour) which add up to a substantial amount, and also substantial costs for expensive short term leasing arrangements for replacement machines rather than investing in more cost efficient long term solutions. This is an inefficient use of budgets to paper over cracks rather than getting on with repairing the walls.

### **What would a more sustainable Parks Service look like?**

#### **Regular maintenance of paths, railings, equipment and infrastructure as well as greenery**

Huge amounts of money are spent on Parks restoration projects (see appendix 4). Within these are huge amounts to replace existing equipment, paths, railings and infrastructure, which with adequate maintenance could have lasted many more years. The cut backs of the 80's and 90's led to parks falling into neglect and disrepair, and much of the money now being spent is just putting right this neglect. It would be far more cost effective to increase regular maintenance spend and so decrease capital costs. Reductions in staff numbers also mean a corresponding rise in the use of harmful pesticides in order to control weeds. Regular maintenance also means staff based in parks which helps to deter crime and anti social behaviour and the added cost of repairing damage.

#### **On site staff based in busier parks.**

Proposals to centralise staff and make them more mobile mean increased costs through fuel use and vehicle leasing, plus increased carbon emissions as a result. On site gardeners also improve safety, clearing litter and hazardous waste early in the day before the parks become busy, making daily visual checks to play equipment, and dealing with or reporting incidents, hazards and issues raised by park users. Additionally residents have repeatedly indicated that the presence of on-site staffing provides reassurance, particularly for women.

#### **Efficient machinery and reduced petrochemical usage**

Modern grass cutting machinery can be run on biodiesel which could be made from waste cooking oil from schools and other council services, saving fuel costs and carbon emissions.

#### **Buffer zones around trees**

Grass left long around trees to protect tree roots and provide wildlife benefits – grass cutting machinery compacts the soil, also risks damage to the tree trunk and branches. This measure would also reduce cutting time.

#### **Staff involvement in design and parks improvements**

Huge amounts are spent on consultants and contractors to implement park improvements. Major savings could be achieved by instead consulting with staff over new designs and works for parks, using their experience of the relevant parks, their problems and possible solutions, and of efficient ways of working. There should be greater consideration of the effect of new designs on maintenance – eg grass mounds, lots of small grass panels replacing larger areas, impact of fencing, new furniture affecting access by machines, all of these changes affect the time required to complete maintenance work.